

Chapter 1

Opportunities and Challenges in Public Education

Over the last several years, student achievement has increased for all groups in all subjects, yet the gaps between rich and poor, White and minority remain a persistent problem. A number of events have occurred on the national, state, and local levels that have made an impact on how schools and teachers approach the issue of closing the achievement gaps. The growing ethnic, racial, and economic diversity of our classrooms is demanding new strategies and skills in communication, instruction, and curriculum development. At the same time, standards-based reform, budget and program cuts, federal and state accountability laws, the “adoration” of test scores as the sole measure of school success, and overwhelmed parents and educators have placed a heavy demand on public education’s and educators’ resources.

The current version of the federal education law, “No Child Left Behind,” has created many challenges for educators. Helping students meet standards and pass tests has become a central activity in many of our lives. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides more information than ever before about the relative performance of students on state standardized tests and highlights the need to ensure that all students succeed even beyond what the tests require.

The National Education Association is placing an expanding emphasis on building support systems and providing resources to NEA affiliates and members to help close the achievement gaps. NEA works with families, local communities, business leaders, and state and national politicians to close the gaps and turn around low-performing schools. These efforts resulted in the creation of the NEA Priority Schools Initiative in

2001. The initiative has yielded several products and services aimed at assisting schools in closing the gaps.

Among the products generated from the Priority Schools Initiative is *Making Low-Performing Schools a Priority: An Association Resource Guide* (available in print or online at www.nea.org/prioritieschools). This guide supports local and state efforts to change low-performing schools into priority schools with high academic achievement for all. The guide provides concrete and practical steps for identifying and assisting schools and districts in crisis and includes a resource section to help teachers, parents, and communities leverage support from organizations, business alliances, and others who have a stake in public education.

Another outgrowth of the Priority Schools project is partnerships with states to provide technical and financial resources to assist affiliates and school districts in turning schools around. Using research-based training for members in effective strategies for community outreach and school improvement, NEA is helping states focus school improvement activities on closing the student achievement gaps.

In 2004, NEA’s leadership placed closing the student achievement gaps at the center of its professional development and policy agenda. This agenda has facilitated the creation of partnerships with civil rights groups, foundations, community-based organizations, and others. These partnerships can support putting the best practices to work for improving the academic and social environments of students in struggling schools and for building stronger relationships among schools, families, and communities.

Through its programs and policies, NEA is working to improve public education to provide great public schools for all students.

“What can I do in my classroom?” That is the question we hear most often when educators confront the reality of the achievement gaps in their school. The purpose of this guide is:

- to offer research-based suggestions for what you can do tomorrow to create a learning environment in which diverse students can learn;
- to challenge educators to meet accountability demands while still offering quality instruction to those students who need the most help; and
- to delve into additional resources to spark even more ideas for how to be successful with all students.

Chapters will include references to original research, Web sites, books, and other publications that will help build educators’ knowledge base as they work with diverse groups of students. In addition, there is a resource section at the end of the guide.

Closing the Achievement Gaps

A major challenge confronts those of us who work in today’s schools. That challenge is the gaps in academic achievement that exist among students by race: White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native and Asian/Pacific Islander students. The challenge also extends to schools based on the economic status of their neighborhoods, with achievement differences often occurring between affluent and high-poverty schools. A picture of these gaps emerges when federal and state laws require schools to break down the data and identify groups of students who are not achieving at high levels.

In order to close the achievement gaps and help these students to be successful, schools need a new vision of these under-achieving students. The work of researchers like Dr. Belinda Williams focuses on the need to move beyond the restructuring of schools to the “re-culturing” of education. Dr. Williams notes that it is important to understand the difference between “improving achievement” and “closing the gap.” (Williams 2003). “Improving achievement” might involve putting in a new program, or some strategies for parental involvement, or even introducing standards. All of those are important. If they are introduced in a fragmented way, however, what you will typically find is only slight improvement in achievement.

“Closing the gaps” involves not only improving achievement for all students, but taking the steps needed to significantly raise the achievement of traditionally under-achieving groups of students, so that their achievement is on the same level as that of mainstream groups of students. As identified in reviews of the research literature, significant changes are needed to close these gaps. In order to take a leadership role in closing the achievement gaps, there are several things you can do:

- Embrace an agenda that focuses on all children and on targeting those strategies that have been shown to close the achievement gaps among groups of students.
- Revisit assumptions about how learning occurs, and integrate a broad range of disciplines, such as sociology, brain research, and cultural anthropology, including research on human development in different environments and contexts.
- Reflect upon the ways you think about your students and the causes of low student achievement. How can we focus more on factors within the system, rather than within children, that create barriers to

effective schooling for poor and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students? What aspects of the system (e.g., classroom instruction, assessment, curriculum, school leadership) can educators influence? For example, what changes can you influence in your classroom, school, district, community, or NEA affiliate to promote equity in schooling? Educators can contribute to overall changes in the system to promote equity in schooling by targeting what is within their sphere of influence, and then working to expand that influence.

- Research innovative, truly comprehensive approaches to school reform. Most school improvement plans focus on issues like class size and special programs. By embracing an “all children” agenda, looking at integrating a range of theories, and focusing on the system, you can engage in comprehensive planning that includes, but goes beyond, these issues. Comprehensive reform can be redefined by requiring accountability beyond one-dimensional strategies (e.g., standardized tests) and toward approaches that address the multidimensional issues facing schools, classrooms, and students today.
- Reflect on the types of learners in your classroom. How do they learn best? In what ways can educators redefine outcomes and results to enable all groups of individuals to contribute productively to society? How can educators enable all learners with the knowledge and interpersonal skills required to successfully participate in the workforce and in varying social, community, and family contexts?

C.A.R.E. for All Students

Research suggests that utilizing best practices connected to culture, abilities, resilience, and effort—what we call the “C.A.R.E. themes” in this guide—can close the achievement gaps. These themes represent a current and solid research founda-

tion on what works best for poor and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students. This guide will help you to reflect, plan, and implement approaches that address the C.A.R.E. themes of cultural, economic, and language differences; unrecognized and undeveloped abilities; resilience; and effort and motivation.

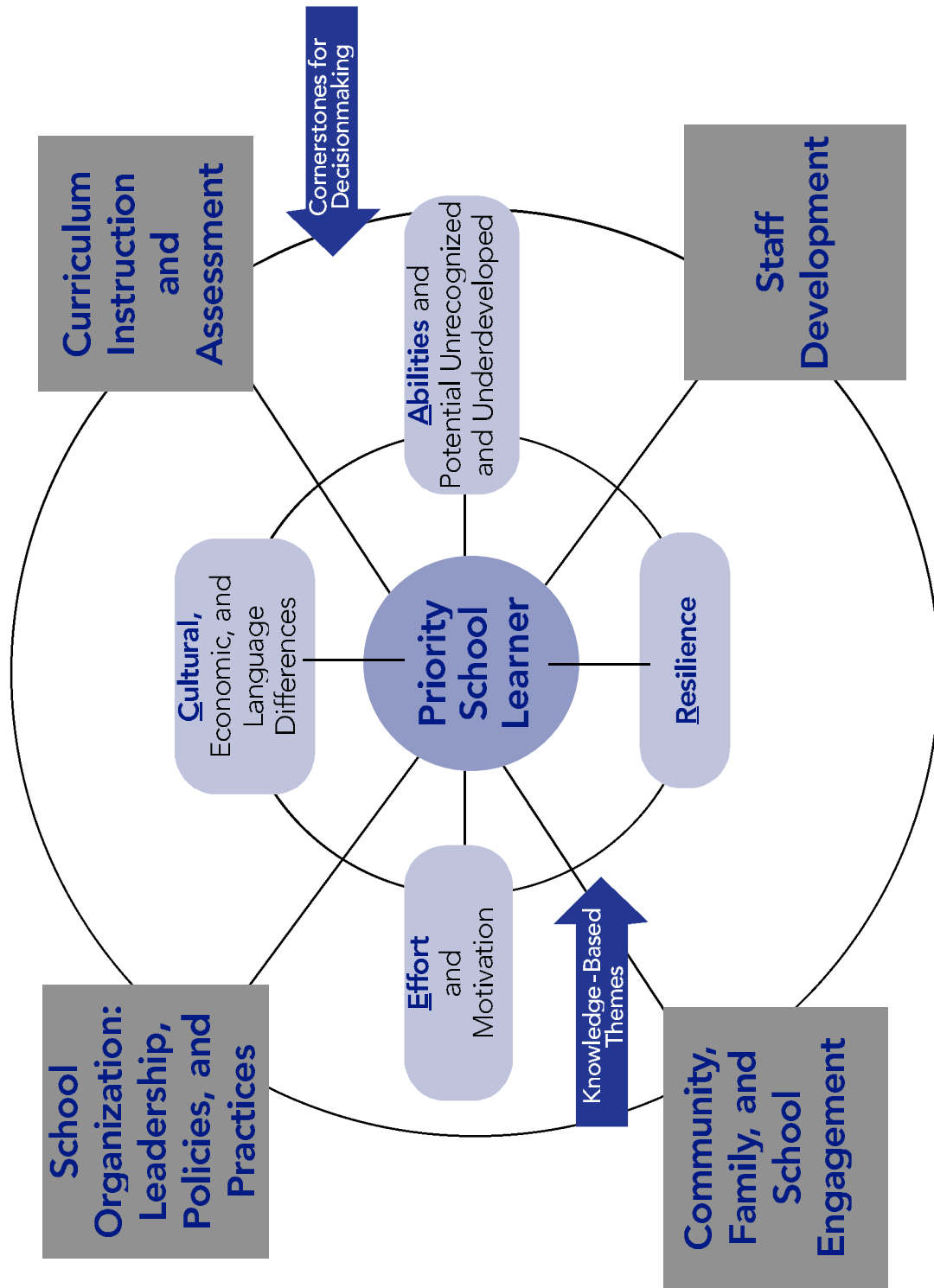
Traditional school reform has focused on four “cornerstones” for improvement: (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) staff development; (3) family, school, and community engagement; and (4) school organization. When we combine what research tells us about the C.A.R.E. themes with these cornerstones, we can change schools so they can address students’ unique needs. The Priority Learner Framework that follows (page 1-4) shows how all of these pieces fit together.

The framework helps to pose such questions as:

- How would we engage families differently if we valued their cultural differences?
- How would instruction change if we were focusing on what students know, rather than what they don’t know?
- What would staff development be like if we wanted to increase the resilience of all students?

In this guide we hope to help you reflect on the causes of low student achievement and how we can change the system of public education by using innovative, comprehensive approaches to school reform. We will encourage you to reflect on the types of learners you have in your schools and classrooms, revisit your theoretical assumptions on how learning occurs, and integrate and embrace strategies that have been proven to close the achievement gaps. By using research-based, classroom-proven strategies to address the C.A.R.E. themes, we can help all students to achieve at high levels, close the achievement gaps, and meet accountability standards.

Priority School Learner Framework



Source: Belinda Williams, Psy.D., Consultant
NEA Priority Schools Initiative

CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy

Each C.A.R.E. theme correlates to one or two key Standards for Effective Pedagogy, developed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE). Building on over 30 years of extensive research on pedagogy for culturally and linguistically diverse students and students living in poverty, CREDE has gleaned five core principles of pedagogy that are critical for the success of students historically at-risk of being “left behind.” CREDE has also identified two additional

standards that are specifically relevant for the success of American Indian/Alaska Native students.

CREDE’s Seven Standards for Effective Pedagogy, in brief, are listed in the chart below. The standards marked with an asterisk are particularly important when working with American Indian/Alaska Native students.

The CREDE standards align with the C.A.R.E. themes to create a coherent map for classroom practice that leads from the research on systemic change to classroom practices that promote success for diverse students.

C.A.R.E. Themes and CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy	
C.A.R.E. Themes	CREDE Standards
Culture: The sum total of one’s experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, language, and interests. Learning is greatest when the cultures of home and school connect.	Contextualization: Connect teaching and curriculum to the experiences, values, knowledge, and needs of students. * Learning through Observation-Modeling: Promote student learning through observation by modeling behaviors, thinking processes, and procedures.
Abilities: Intelligence is modifiable and multi-dimensional. Abilities are developed through cultural experiences; culture affects thoughts and expression.	Challenging Activities/Teaching Complex Thinking: Challenge students toward cognitive complexity. Language and Literacy Development across the Curriculum: Develop student competence in the language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum.
Resilience: Displayed when protective factors alter a person’s response to risk factors (poverty, crime, etc.) in the environment. Resilient students exhibit social competence, problem-solving skills, and a sense of future.	Instructional Conversation: Teach through conversation.
Effort: The energy used in reaching a goal. Maximized when students receive teacher encouragement and high expectations for quality work.	Joint Productive Activity/Teachers and Students Producing Together: Facilitate learning through activity shared by educators and students. * Student Choice: Encourage student decisionmaking.

How C.A.R.E. Theme Chapters Are Organized

The heart of the *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps* is divided into four main chapters aligned with the themes. Each of the theme chapters has a similar structure with key sections that are described below:

1. **C.A.R.E. Theme Introductions:** A brief orientation to the C.A.R.E. themes is given that underscores their importance in effectively closing the student achievement gaps, defines each theme, and references what research has identified as key factors in that theme.
2. **Enduring Understandings:** These emphasize the understandings we want to be sustained in the classroom and are drawn from the research on effective pedagogy for teachers of low-income and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students.
3. **Optimal Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students:** This section describes the knowledge and skills that educators of low-income and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students need in order to be most effective, drawing from the research in culturally relevant pedagogy.
4. **Educator Check-In: How Am I Doing?:** The Educator Check-In is a self-assessment that includes a series of questions about the chapter theme and is designed to help you reflect on your practice and think honestly about what you are doing in each of these areas.
5. **Approaches, Strategies, and Activities At-a-Glance Grid:** This matrix is a ready-reference to sample activities that illustrate each theme and is designed so that educators can review the contents and quickly access what they need.
6. **CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy:** Each C.A.R.E. theme correlates to one or two key Standards for Effective Pedagogy, building on over 30 years of extensive research on instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students and students living in poverty by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE).
7. **Ready-to-Use Approaches, Strategies, and Activities:** This section consists of learning experiences that help educators (a) develop a culturally competent learning community in their classroom; (b) recognize and strengthen students' abilities; (c) promote students' resilience; and (d) engage student motivation and effort. The strategies and activities presented are intended to be only a starting point for educators to strengthen their success with culturally and linguistically diverse students.
8. **Chapter References:** This summary of resources will help you to expand your repertoire and understanding of each C.A.R.E. theme.

Please note: Use state or district curriculum standards to guide the development of your own activities. We have included examples for elementary and secondary classes.

For more information on any topic or activity, please refer to the resource cited.